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Book Review

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Moving Heathen and Earth in New England

Sarah Johnson

Caleb's Crossing

By Geraldine Brooks

Viking, 306 pages, \$31

The title of *Caleb's Crossing* refers to two related happenings: a young Wampanoag man's journey to the Massachusetts mainland from his home on Martha's Vineyard, and his gradual assumption of English ways. His story is filtered through the narration of Bethia Mayfield, a minister's daughter.

The two meet by chance when she is 12. Her friendship with the youth she calls Caleb blossoms as they talk about their daily lives and religious beliefs - all of which Bethia hides from her father and brother.

Pulitzer Prize winner Geraldine Brooks (*March*, in 2005) situates her riveting tale of cross-cultural exploration in Puritan America on a few slim facts. In 1665, Caleb Cheeshahteumauk became the first Native American to graduate from Harvard. His letter to his English benefactors, reproduced on the novel's endpapers, is especially remarkable; it was written in Latin.

"Listening, not speaking, has been my way," writes Bethia, a perceptive and careful chronicler of their lives, an intellectual in a society that believes women are capable of domestic duty and not much else. She also has a shameful secret. She finds Caleb's heathen faith too appealing for her own good. Although she repents, she is Puritan enough to think she's damned, having caused her mother's death with her desire for "forbidden fruit."

When Bethia's father discovers the extent of Caleb's knowledge, he decides to instruct him further in the Gospel and the classics, as any good Calvinist missionary would. Caleb sees a way of improving his people's lot and comes to live with the Mayfields, which leads to a spiritual battle of sorts between Mayfield and Caleb's uncle, the pawaaw (religious leader) of the Wampanoag.

Caleb's and Bethia's paths take them from Martha's Vineyard to Cambridge. Both sets of surroundings are superbly evoked through Bethia's admittedly biased viewpoint. The island is an isolated haven of sun-dappled beaches and swirling mists, a paradise on Earth despite the tenuousness of life there. In contrast, she finds Cambridge an "unlovely town" that reeks of animals and too many people, and whose closely constructed houses don't let her spirit breathe. What is the purpose of progress, she wonders, if you have to leave your true self behind?

Bethia's account has an early American formality, with just enough period syntax to feel authentic (and enough old-fashioned usage of "loose" instead of "lose," to drive a copy editor mad). Terms like "frigging" and "cackhanded" aren't exactly everyday lingo, but the prose falls on the ear in a natural way.

As always, Brooks treads the dividing line between literary and popular fiction with confidence. Her work is strongly plotted, full of twists and surprises: life-changing disappointments, sudden opportunities, unexpected crossroads. The language is as fresh and crisp as the salt-tinged air, and her characters are, for the most part, ripened to their fullest potential. The one exception is Caleb himself. We get to know his personality and mettle, but he is kept at a distance. There are times - fortunately rare - when he reads more as symbol than flesh and blood.

In fact, the novel is much more Bethia's than his. She is one of Brooks's most rounded creations; her character, unlike Caleb's, is completely fictional. Bethia is no feisty anachronism but a woman of her era, and her yearning to achieve more than society grants her is achingly real.

Higher education has changed over time; students aren't expected to converse in Latin, and they can't pay for their tuition with sacks of grain. Still, the intellectual craving expressed by these 17th-century characters comes through clearly to our modern mindsets. This is a brilliantly composed novel full of wit, spiritual contemplation and the deep love of learning. At the same time, *Caleb's Crossing* makes us feel the full impact of what these people went through to bring their dreams to fruition.

Sarah Johnson, an editor for the Historical Novel Society, blogs at readingthepast.com.